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Offender Telephone System promotes successful reentry, aids security and supports crime victims

During its five-year history, TDCJ's Offender Telephone System (OTS) has helped offenders maintain communication with families and friends in the community. In addition, the OTS is an important security and prison management tool and provides financial support for the Texas Crime Victims' Compensation Fund.

Texas was the last state to put pay phones in its prison facilities for regular offender use. Legislation passed in 2007 called for TDCJ to award a contract for the installation of the telephone system. TDCJ staff representing seven different departments reviewed proposals from three bidders for the telephone system contract. In 2008 the Texas Board of Criminal Justice awarded a contract to Embarq, a Kansas-based communications company later acquired by CenturyLink (CTL). Installation of the offender telephones began in 2009.

OTS allows eligible offenders unlimited minutes of phone time a month, though individual calls are limited to 20 minutes or less. Offenders may only call friends and family members whose names appear on their ap-

proved calling list. Crime victims and their families can block OTS calls, and all calls except those to an offender's attorney of record are subject to monitoring and recording. Of-



fenders with major disciplinary problems, gang affiliations or on death row do not have access to the telephone system. Calls may only be made to home land line telephone numbers and post-paid cell phones. No calls are allowed to internet services, 800 numbers, businesses, pay phones or international numbers.

Prior to using the OTS, "voice prints" are created by offenders during the enrollment process. Bilingual software prompts an offender to state his or her full name four times

into a telephone handset and then once again for verification. Offenders then designate the Texas Department of Criminal Justice as their "facility" by repeating the agency name in full, four times. To make a call, an offender enters the number being dialed on a keypad, followed by his or her TDCJ number, which serves as a Personal Identification Number or PIN. Offenders then verify their name by saying it in the same manner it was recorded during enrollment, and then say "Texas Department of Criminal Justice."

To receive calls, offender family and friends can register online at texasprisonphone.com or by calling CTL at 866-806-7804. The name on the registrant's driver's license or state identification card and the name on the telephone service bill/listing must match. Friends and family registrants must confirm that they are the registered owner of the telephone number and are not registering a prepaid cell phone number. They must agree to allow the offender to call the phone number. Registrants must also be at least 18 years old and confirm that they will not forward calls or make a 3-way call received from an offender. Only after an offender's name, PIN

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and the number dialed have been verified will a call go through.

According to TDCJ Reentry and Integration Division Director April Zamora, continued contact with free world supporters plays an important role in the reintegration of offenders into society. "Family reunification is a critical piece of the reentry process," said Zamora. "Telephone contact with friends, family and other support systems allows offenders to foster and maintain relationships with those critical support systems during incarceration, which can contribute to greater success upon return to the community."

Director of TDCJ's Correctional Institutions Division William Stephens added his perspective on how the OTS has generated benefits for both offenders and the agency, saying, "After five years, I can honestly say that the Offender Telephone System has been a very effective resource. Offenders are able to stay connected with a larger number of friends and families. These strong relationships

foster hope and provide the offender with needed support. The OTS has also proven to be an effective resource in the management of the offender population and has assisted in investigations which result in a safer environment for staff and offenders."

When the OTS was authorized, the Texas Legislature appropriated additional funding for OIG investigator and criminal intelligence positions. The OIG is able to monitor an offender phone call made from any of the units throughout the system (other than a call to an offender's attorney of record). Monitoring is both random and targeted toward certain offenders, and is in addition to any monitoring that unit correctional staff may conduct.

As required by statute, Texas receives 40 percent of the gross billable revenue generated by the system. The first \$10 million received within each fiscal year by the state is to be deposited in the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund, while all revenue beyond

that will be split evenly between that fund and the state's General Revenue fund. More than \$30 million has been deposited into the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund since the OTS began operating five years ago.

Angie McCown, director of TDCJ's Victim Services Division, explained how funds generated by OTS help aid crime victims. "The Crime Victims' Compensation (CVC) Program is supported through a legislative appropriation from the Compensation to Victims of Crime Fund. Revenue for the Fund is collected from convicted offenders through criminal court costs, fees, and fines, while victims of violence are assisted with expenses related to the crime. These expenses may include funeral costs, medical expenses, lost wages, counseling expenses and other costs associated with the crime. There are many losses a victim suffers as the result of violent crime victimization and the CVC Program is one avenue for addressing victims' financial losses." ●